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Water, Art, and the Canadian Identity: At the Water's Edge

A river is water in its loveliest form; rivers have life and sound and movement and infinity of variation, rivers are veins of the earth through which the life blood returns to the heart. (*A River Never Sleeps*)¹

Roderick Haig-Brown, the author of these lines, lived on Canada's West Coast. He could not imagine life without his beloved rivers. For water is life. Without it, we cannot exist, nor can any of the other forms of life with which we share the planet.

That should be reason enough to value water as one of the most precious riches that the earth provides. But water gives more than life; water contributes meaning to our lives, as an essential part of what makes life worthwhile.

"Meaning" cannot be measured and classified, but it can be expressed in art. Writers, artists and musicians have been inspired by water, using their works as media for communicating its more abstract value.

Indeed, water's value to the human spirit has been celebrated throughout the history of the world. One of the planet's earliest civilizations, known as Sumer, had celebrations exalting water and the life it supports. Many ancient artifacts have been discovered which reveal this long-time recognition of the renewing properties of water. One such work of art is a 4,500 year old sculpture depicting an ancient prince named Gudea holding a bowl from which flows a stream rich in fish. Literature, too, is full of references to the importance of water. For two thousand years the passage "He leadeth me beside the still waters, He restoreth my soul" has often been quoted from inspirational literature.



¹ Excerpt from *A River Never Sleeps* copyright ©1946, 1974 by Roderick Haig-Brown, published by Douglas & McIntyre and reprinted by permission.



◀ Dorothy Elsie Knowles, *Reedy Lake*, 1962. The Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Gift from the Georgia J. Waldon Estate and Canada Council Matching Grant, 1965.



◀ Walter J. Phillips, *Evening*, 1921. Colour Woodcut. The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.



The Water's Edge

Streams, rivers, and lakes occupy a central place in the natural world, an influence often reflected in various art forms. Many artists are fascinated by water in its many states. Where water meets land, the allure is intensified.

Water's appeal is certainly not limited to artists. The bank of a stream or river, the shores of a lake – touch a chord deep within us all, a chord that an artist can help us hear more distinctly. Such is the case with Hugh MacLennan's book *The Watch That Ends The Night*, where the writer has a revelation while resting by a wilderness lake:

*In the early October of that year, in the cathedral hush of a Quebec Indian summer with the lake drawing into its mirror the fire of the maples, it came to me that to be able to love the mystery surrounding us is the final and only sanction of human existence.*²

People have always preferred to live where water and land meet. Our fascination with shorelines may have begun aeons ago when distant ancestors crawled from the water and began breathing and moving about on legs. There are practical explanations for our attraction to the water's edge. It provides access to water for daily needs, and proximity to convenient transportation. The boundary between land and water is one of the richest, most productive ecological zones on earth. Fish and other forms of marine life are born, grow, and live there. Food abounds for terrestrial animals and birds as well. Until recently in human history, most people hunted and gathered their own food, and so they too were drawn to the water's edge by the nourishment available there.

Today, few of us draw water or food directly from a river or lake, yet we are still attracted to the water's

edge. And it is here that many of Canada's artists – painters, musicians, film makers, photographers, and writers of every kind – find inspiration. Though increased urbanization has drawn us away from the water's edge, it has also served to increase the water's magnetism. Perhaps people believe as Henry David Thoreau did that "in Wildness is the preservation of the World."³

Whether contained by the shores of a northern lake, rushing in torrents down the slopes of the continental divide, moving majestically toward the sea, or crashing with fury on rock-bound coasts, the awe and creativity inspired by water are a global response. Canada, with an abundance of water, spawns a culture particularly rich in water imagery.

Water and the first Canadians

For thousands of years, the native people of Canada's West coast selected sites with fine river or ocean views for their villages. The magnificent totems that vividly expressed their culture commanded the shoreline, and the legends by which they lived brought together creatures of land, water and sky.

Aboriginal peoples often ascribe supernatural properties to places where water shows unusual characteristics. On a height of land in northern Manitoba, there is a pond from which water flows east into the Hayes River, and west into the Nelson. This is the Echimamish, "the-river-that-flows-both-ways." In tribute to the almost mystical reversal of flow that made portaging between the rivers so easy, Native people left offerings each time they crossed this divide.

The Inuit of Canada's North have a special relationship with water. They derive a great deal of their sustenance from it, seals and fish being the mainstay of many traditional Inuit diets. In the long dark winter, villages were established on or near the ice

² MacLennan, Hugh. *The Watch That Ends the Night* (Toronto: Macmillan Canada, 1959), p. 372.

³ Thoreau, Henry David. "Walking." *Atlantic Monthly*, June 1862.



◀ Pitseolak Ashoona, *Netsilik River*, 1973. Stonecut. Reproduced with the permission of the West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative Ltd.

Pitseolak describes the setting on which this print is based: "We would often camp at Natsilik, a place about a week's journey from the Cape Dorset, near many lakes. It had the most beautiful drinking water, the most beautiful water I had ever found." (Pitseolak in Eber, 1971).

Text from *The Inuit Print*. Reproduced with the permission of the Canadian Museum of Civilization.



◀ George Heriot, *View On The River St. John Near The Poquioq*, updated. Sigmund Samuel Collection, Royal Ontario Museum.

to provide ready access to this food source. In the spring and summer, they fished for trout in inland lakes and rivers.

Many Inuit now live in permanent villages, and no longer move from camp to camp. However, the perils of living in the North remain, as does the necessity of understanding and respecting the role of water. Knowing how water can be used for nourishment and transportation can be life-saving skills. Further, many families are now reverting to the old way of life, teaching their children to live off of the land and water by hunting and fishing.

Canada's native populations are inextricably linked to natural waterways for both physical and spiritual health. Recent decades have seen the quality of many water systems degraded by the pressures of human development.

To many Native people, deterioration of the land results in the deterioration of their health and way of life, while providing them with few off-setting benefits. Grand Chief B. G. Cheechoo, chief of a northern

Ontario native population, the Nishnawbe-Aski Nation, explains the relationship:

*Our history is tied to these waters. Our continued reliance on fishing, trapping and hunting and our desire to do so is dependent on these waters. Our future is based on these waters . . . Any threat to such waters poses a direct threat to our survival.*⁴

Water in history

Flowing water has provided Canada with more than inspiration. During the period of European colonization, the rivers carried furs, trade goods, and explorers, heralding the influx of settlers into the wilderness.

The arrangement of streams and rivers flowing into Hudson Bay and into the Mackenzie and St. Lawrence Rivers permitted canoes to travel west and north across the length and breadth of the land that became Canada. Historian Harold Innis recognized this pattern stating, "It is no mere accident that the present Dominion coincides roughly with the

⁴ Cheechoo, B.G.—Grand Chief of the Nishnawbe-Aski Nation. Brief No. 71, Inquiry on Federal Water Policy. October 15, 1984, p. 2.

Lieut. R. Hood, *Trout Fall and Portage on the Trout River, Northwest Territories, 1819*. National Archives of Canada, Ottawa. C-15257.



fur-trading areas of northern North America.”⁵ Innis differed sharply with those who suggested Canada is an illogical nation; on the contrary, he insisted that the natural water courses of the northern half of the continent provide the outlines of the nation.

The histories of the St. Lawrence and Red Rivers were indicative of the ways in which our waterways shaped this country. In Donald Creighton’s vision of Canada, the St. Lawrence River was central to the political and economic development of a great nation. His enthusiasm about these waterways was expressed in *The Empire of the St. Lawrence*, written in 1937:

*It was the one great river which led from the eastern shore into the heart of the continent. . . . The river was not only a great actuality: it was the central truth of a religion. Men lived by it, at once consoled and inspired by its promises, its whispered suggestions, and its shouted commands; and it was a force in history, not merely because of its accomplishments, but because of its shining, ever-receding possibilities.*⁶

Furthermore, long before Canada became a nation, the Red River was central to life in Manitoba. Like those along the St. Lawrence, farms were laid out as long, narrow river lots, giving settlers access to the river.

Historian William Morton describes how a distinctive western society emerged on the banks of the Red River in the 19th century. It was, he wrote, “an island of civilization in the wilderness.”⁷ The Red River Settlement was a uniquely dual society consisting of near equal numbers of French-speaking Catholic Métis and English-speaking Protestant settlers.

The distant government in Ottawa understood neither the make up of the population nor its intimate relationship with the Red River. It inflicted on the people a land survey that ignored the river lot system, alienating people from their way of life. Violence erupted and the tragedy of the Red River Rebellion followed.

But some politicians of the time understood the fundamental significance of water to the proposed nation. Seven years before Canada became a nation, one of the most eloquent of the Fathers of Confederation, Thomas D’Arcy McGee, spoke of the link between water and people:

*I see within the round of that shield the peaks of the Western Mountains and the crests of the Eastern waves – the winding Assiniboine, the five-fold lakes, the St. Lawrence, the Ottawa, the Saguenay, the St. John, and the Basin of Minas – by all these flowing waters in all the valleys they fertilize, in all the cities they visit in their courses, I see a generation of industrious, contented, moral men, free in name and in fact, – men capable of maintaining, in peace and in war, a Constitution worthy of such a country.*⁸

Water in words

Whether found in the oldest of flood myths or a modern novel or poem, literature from every time period has included references to water. Water bodies, large and small, have provoked feelings of fear, respect, curiosity, and joy. Canada’s earliest literature, the journals of explorers such as Alexander Mackenzie, Simon Fraser, and David Thompson are rich with accounts of the waters they saw.

⁵ Innis, Harold A. *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1956), p. 392.

⁶ Creighton, Donald. As quoted in *The Writings of Canadian History: Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing: 1900-1970*, by Carl Berger, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986).

⁷ Morton, William. As quoted in *The Writings of Canadian History: Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing: 1900-1970*, by Carl Berger, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), p. 247.

⁸ D’Arcy McGee, Thomas. Speech made in the Legislative Assembly, May 2nd, 1860. As quoted in *Canadian Literature: the beginnings to the 20th century*, ed. Catherine M. McLay (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1974), p. 181.



◀ Frances Anne Hopkins, *Shooting the Rapids*, 1879. National Archives of Canada, Ottawa. C-2774.



◀ Robert Todd, *The Ice Cone, Montmorency Falls*, c.1850. The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Travelling the Black River, Thompson wrote:

*The dashing of the water against the rocks, the deep roar of the torrent, the hollow sound of the fall, with the surrounding high dark frowning hills form a scenery grand and awful . . .*⁹

These feelings of both awe and respect highlight, for all Canadians, the perils faced by these early explorers of such a rugged, indomitable land.

In the summer of 1808, Simon Fraser captured similar emotions in his journal while recounting his expedition down the tumultuous river that bears his name. Of one stretch of river, he notes:

The struggle which the men on this trial experienced between the whirlpools and rocks almost exhausted their strength; the canoes were in perpetual danger

*of sinking or being broken to pieces. It was a desperate undertaking.*¹⁰

While explorers were filling in the map of western Canada, writers in eastern Canada were reflecting on the dominance of nature and the significance of rivers and lakes in their lives.¹¹ Although people recognized the beauty and aesthetic value of the vast water systems, early settlers were always very aware of the dangers involved in traversing them. Those who were not cautious often paid dearly for their mistake. The diary of Lady Simcoe, wife of John Graves Simcoe (the first lieutenant governor of Upper Canada), was written in 1792 and describes one such occurrence:

People cross from Chippewa to Ft. Schlosser, but great caution is necessary the Current is so extremely strong & if they did not make exactly the mouth of the Chippewa the force of the water

⁹ Thompson, David. *Travels in Western North America, 1784-1812*, ed. Victor G. Hopwood (Toronto: Macmillan Canada, 1971), p. 137.

¹⁰ Fraser, Simon. *The Letters and Journals of Simon Fraser 1806-1808*, ed. W. Kaye Lamb (Toronto: Macmillan Canada, 1960), p. 72.

Lucius R. O'Brien, *Sunrise on the Saguenay*, 1880. The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Royal Canadian/Canada Academy of Arts diploma work, deposited by the artist, Toronto, 1880.



below it would inevitably carry them down the falls without redress. Eight soldiers who were intoxicated met with this accident in crossing the River some years since. Their bodies were taken up entire some distance below the Falls.¹¹

The earliest Canadian novel is generally considered to be *The History of Emily Montague*, written by Frances Brooke in 1769. The story is notable for its descriptions of rivers, lakes, and waterfalls.

Waterscapes are also the theme of many poems, such as the one written by Thomas Cary in 1789 entitled "Abram's Plains." In this poem he describes the Great Lakes from "cold Superior," to Huron, "distinguish'd by its thund'ring bay," while Niagara is depicted as the "dread fall," among other such ominous impressions of the Great Lakes – St. Lawrence system.¹²

Not all writers saw Canada's water systems as such dangerous entities. Poets such as Adam Allan and J. Mackay romanticised the streams and lakes of the eastern half of the continent in their poems of the 18th century. Waterfalls, particularly Niagara, as well as the sheer size of rivers and lakes of the New World pushed European newcomers to flights of superlatives.

Since western Canada was settled so much later than the East, not much of the romantic literature was devoted to that vast landscape. An exception is *The Great Lone Land*, in which William Francis Butler tells of his journey to the Rocky Mountains from Fort Gary, where Winnipeg now stands. Of the Saskatchewan River he wrote:

From the glaciers and ice valleys of this great range of mountains innumerable streams descend into the plains. For a time they wander, as if heedless of direction, through groves and glades and green spreading declivities; then, assuming greater fixidity

of purpose, they gather up many a wandering rill, and start eastward upon a long journey. . . . This river, which has along it every diversity of hill and vale, meadow-land and forest, treeless plain and fertile hill-side, is called by the wild tribes who dwell along its glorious shores the Kissaskatchewan, or Rapid-flowing River.¹³

Canadian poetry seemed to flourish in the 19th century. River systems central to settlement and commercial life were at the heart of this emerging literature. Charles Sangster, known in his lifetime as "Canada's national bard," published *The St. Lawrence and the Saguenay* in 1856. It describes a canoe trip through the Thousand Islands and down the St. Lawrence and other eastern rivers.

As Canada achieved nationhood, Sangster was followed by four writers who became known as "the Confederation poets." Charles G.D. Roberts, Bliss Carman, Archibald Lampman and Duncan C. Scott often found their themes in the lakes and streams they knew first hand. In "Autochthon," we feel with Roberts the shifting current:

*I am the hush of calm,
I am the speed,
The flood-tide's triumphing psalm,
The marsh-pool's heed;
I work in the rocking roar
Where cataracts fall;
I flash in the prisms fire that dances o'er
The dew's ephemeral ball.¹⁴*

Some of Lampman's best known poetry also had water themes. The almost ethereal feeling experienced by the author in these natural settings is translated into poetry. Such is the case in the poem

¹¹ Simcoe, Mrs. *Mrs. Simcoe's Diary*, ed. Mary Quayle Innis (Toronto: Macmillan Canada, 1965), p. 77.

¹² Cary, Thomas. As quoted in *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English*, ed. Carl F. Klink (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 85.

¹³ Butler, William Francis. *The Great Lone Land: A Narrative of Travel & Adventure in the North-West of America* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Low, & Stearle, 1872), p. 198.

¹⁴ Roberts, Sir Charles G.D. "Autochthon." In *Our Canadian Literature*, chosen by Bliss Carman and Lorne Pierce (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1935), p. 51.

"The Dawn on the Lievre" when Lampman describes an early morning sunrise on the river:

*Up the dark-valleyed river stroke by stroke
We drove the water from the rustling blade;
And when the night was almost gone we made
The Oxbow bend; and there the dawn awoke;
Full on the shrouded night-charged river broke
The sun, down the long mountain valley rolled
A sudden, swinging avalanche of gold,
Through mists that sprang and reeled aside like
smoke.¹⁵*

The landscape gives force to his words. They are instilled with the motion and energy that can be felt in any natural outdoor setting.

Coming from a different tradition, the poetry of Pauline Johnson also captures this life pulse of nature. Born to an English mother and a Mohawk father, she wrote poetry celebrating her Indian heritage and the Canadian landscape, particularly its lakes and rivers. She toured throughout Canada, England, and the United States, giving recitals of her poetry, which contributed to her great popularity at the turn of the century.

The following lines from "The Song My Paddle Sings" are known to most schoolchildren:

*And up on the hills against the sky,
A fir tree rocking its lullaby,
Swings, swings,
Its emerald wings,
Swelling the song that my paddle sings.¹⁶*

In this context, water soothes and comforts. In many cultures, it is seen as a cleanser of both the body and the spirit, often used to mark fresh starts or absolution, as in the Christian baptism.

The beneficial properties of water do, however, have an antithesis. Though water is a life giving force, it is also capable of great destruction. This dual role is one that is reflected in all of nature – untameable and unpredictable. Margaret Laurence recognized this and used water to symbolize the similar duality of human nature, writing:

The river flowed both ways. The current moved from north to south, but the wind usually came from the south, rippling the bronze-green water in the opposite direction. This apparently impossible contradiction, made apparent and possible, still fascinated Morag, even after the years of river-watching.¹⁷

Rapid industrialization and development began to reduce the quality of Canada's natural environment after World War Two, the hardest hit being the country's streams and lakes. More writers began to identify the changes that were occurring in terms of ecosystem health as well as economic health. In

Rivers of Canada, published in 1974, Hugh MacLennan identifies the modern uses of Canada's water systems with a sense of loss at the changing role of water in Canadian lives:

... the rivers of Canada are still there, and their appearance and character have changed little or not at all in the last century and a half. It is only our use of them that has altered. Now we fly over them, build dams on them, fish in them for sport, use them for municipal water supplies, and some of them we have poisoned with sewage and industrial effluents. ... But the rivers are as worth knowing as they ever were, though none of us will know them as the voyageurs did.¹⁸

Though we will never experience Canada's rivers with the same intensity as the voyageurs, they remain essential to our way of life and our artistry. Writers continue to look to water as subject and inspiration for their works.

Water and image

Water has always had a role in Canadian art; however, its dominance has varied with the changing popularity of landscape as a subject for artwork. Further, artists differed in their treatment and focus: some artists concentrated on the East while others found their inspiration in the West; some had a photographic style, while others were clearly impressionistic.

Religious themes dominated early French-Canadian art. Nevertheless, the backdrop to these pious paintings was often a landscape dominated by water. But Canadian landscape painting really began after 1759. At first, it was mainly the British who were drawn to land and water as art subjects. One of the most creative of these painters was Thomas Davies, a British military officer, in whose pictures rivers, lakes, and waterfalls are dominant features.

Davies' paintings sparkled with brilliant colour, in contrast to the muted tones of many of his colleagues. This can be seen in one of his most famous paintings, *A View of the Lower Part of the Falls of St. Anne near Quebec*. By European standards, his colours seemed exaggerated, but Davies' watercolours are today the most valuable sketches of Canada from the eighteenth century.

Joseph Légaré was one of the first Canadians to begin moving out of the old world tradition, pioneering the use of oils in landscape painting. His *Cascades de la rivière Saint-Charles à la Jeune Lorette*, circa 1840, marked a new departure in Canadian painting.

Between 1860 and 1890, many artists responded to national aspirations of expansion, with landscape paintings featuring the rivers and streams of the West. They were encouraged by the patronage of the Governor General and by the free transportation provided by the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR).

¹⁵ Lampman, Archibald. "The Dawn on the Lievre." In *Our Canadian Literature*, chosen by Bliss Carman & Lorne Pierce (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1935), p. 83.

¹⁶ Johnson, Pauline. "The Song My Paddle Sings." In *Our Canadian Literature*, chosen by Bliss Carman & Lorne Pierce (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1935), p. 121.

¹⁷ Laurence, Margaret. *The Diviners* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987), p. 3.

¹⁸ MacLennan, Hugh. *Rivers of Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan Canada, 1974), p. 36.

Thomas Davies. *A View of the Lower Part of the Falls of St. Anne near Quebec*, 1790. The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.



Joseph Légaré, *Cascades de la rivière Saint-Charles à la Jeune Lorette*, 1840 C. Oil on canvas. Collection: Musée du Québec, 58.358, Patrick Altman.



William Armstrong painted many scenes of western Canada. He was an engineer who accompanied Colonel Wolsely's expedition to subdue the Red River Rebellion in 1870. He painted many natural settings during the journey; particularly notable are those of streams and lakes along the north shore of Lake Superior.

Paul Kane (1810-1871), is one of the most celebrated 19th century painters of the Canadian West. While recording the lives of native Indians, he sketched rivers, waterfalls, portages and life along the waterways on which he travelled by canoe with fur traders of the Hudson's Bay Company. *White Mud Portage, Winnipeg River* (1856) is one of the numerous paint-

ings Kane produced from sketches made during these trips. But even his wildest landscapes were romanticised in the European tradition.

British artists, accustomed to the gentler English countryside, were stimulated by the sheer size and frequently violent nature of Canadian waterfalls and rivers. Most of them, however, were so heavily influenced by European traditions that they tended to draw the land as they thought it should be instead of how it really was. These ties to the past prevented most of the paintings of this period from being truly "nationalistic," a product of a uniquely Canadian experience and perception.



◀ Paul Kane, *White Mud Portage, Winnipeg River*, c. 1851–1856. The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Transferred from the Parliament of Canada, 1888.



◀ Cornelius Krieghoff, *The Passing Storm, Saint-Féréol*, 1854. The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

There were, however, some painters in this period who managed to overcome this overreliance on European conventions in painting. Many would argue that Cornelius Krieghoff and G.B. Fisher are such artists. G.B. Fisher's drawings of the St. Lawrence River, the Grand River, and Chaudière Falls, are still considered to be among the most beautiful prints of the Canadian landscape.

While Kane was concentrating on the West, Cornelius Krieghoff was similarly engaged in the East. He focused on the rural people of Quebec, but many of his settings feature the rivers and lakes that were the centres of life and commerce in that time. His depictions of the inhabitants and untamed natural scenes convey a feeling of intimacy and joy. Canoes, log rafts and portages are usually portrayed as being small and somewhat insignificant within the dominating natural world. In paintings such as *The Passing Storm, Saint-Féréol* (1854), waterfalls plunge into the St. Lawrence,

the foaming turbulence set off against the glowing colours of autumn. Krieghoff seems to have enjoyed his life in the New World; perhaps this is somehow conveyed in his work, making him one of Canada's best loved artists.

New eyes, new views

In France at the end of the century, new currents in art were emerging that would profoundly affect Canadian landscape painting. *Spring Landscape, Arthabaska* (1921) by Aurèle de Foy Suzor-Côté shows how deeply he had been influenced by the impressionists during his studies in France. Maurice Cullen and James Morrice were also among the earliest Canadian painters to portray the Canadian landscape in impressionistic terms.

These artists exerted a vital influence on the development of the best known community of Canadian

A. de F. Suzor-Côté, *Spring Landscape*,
Arthabaska, 1921. Stolen from McGill
 University, 1990. ►



Tom Thomson, *Spring Ice*, 1916. The
 National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. ►



artists – the Group of Seven. Convinced of the importance of a distinctive Canadian art in the development of the nation, they looked to landscapes, and in particular to the northern wilderness. “The great purpose of landscape art,” said the Group in 1919, “is to make us at home in our own country.”¹⁹ The North was then seen as a symbol of the Canadian identity, representative of the rugged determination that had made the country great.

The group of seven

A new form of art began emerging in Canada in the early 1900s; it entailed a shedding of European traditions to produce art that was an honest portrayal

of Canada, unfettered by conventional painting methods. The resulting works were glorious and bold, capturing the subject with a new perspective based more on feeling than simple transcription. Often the subjects of these works were natural settings – rivers, lakes, and streams.

At the forefront of this movement was a group of painters who began to notice a unity in their works. They included Tom Thomson, Lawren Harris, A. Y. Jackson, J. E. H. MacDonald, Frederick H. Varley, Arthur Lismer, Frank Johnson, and Franklin Carmichael. Many of them worked at the same lithography office, while art exhibits and societies served to introduce the others. In Algonquin Park, a favourite site of the Group, Tom Thomson, a knowledgeable woodsman

¹⁹ Group of Seven. As quoted in *The History of Painting in Canada: Toward a People's Art*, by Barry Lord (Toronto: NC Press, 1974), p. 138.



◀ F.H. Varley, *Stormy Weather, Georgian Bay*, c. 1920. The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Reproduction courtesy of F.H. Varley Estate/Mrs. D. McKay.

and canoeist, turned the eyes of the other artists to the Canadian wilderness.

Tom Thomson powerfully inspired the other artists. In the minds of many Canadians his paintings *Northern Lake* (1913), *Northern River* (1914-15), and *Spring Ice* (1916) still remain glorious symbols of this country.

Thomson died mysteriously in 1917, but his legacy lived on when, in 1920, his colleagues officially formed the Group of Seven. It served to cement friendships that had been alive for almost a decade, as well as providing a protective front against the criticism which the artists faced. It also enabled them to launch a vigorous campaign of support for the revolutionary works they were producing at the time.

At first the works of the Group of Seven were subjected to bitter denunciation for the “decadent ideas” they were propagating, and which some columnists considered “an affront to common decency.” Such criticism served to draw attention to the artists. Acceptance by the Canadian public was increasing and before long the works of members of the Group were considered expressions of the essence of Canada.

The Group themselves played an important part in the claiming of northern Canada as the domain of the artist as well as the explorer, interpreting and endowing it with meaning. A. Y. Jackson wrote of Algoma:

Since this country was on the height of land, there were dozens of lakes, many of them not on the map. For identification purposes we gave them names. The bright sparkling lakes we named after people we admired like Thomson and MacCallum; to the swampy ones, all messed up with moose tracks, we gave the names of the critics who disparaged us.²⁰

By the early 1930s, the Group had painted scenes of the country from coast to coast. Each artist maintained his own individual style; some of the painters also became associated with a particular area (Algoma, for example, was considered MacDonald’s territory).

The Group’s final exhibition was held in 1931. The Group disbanded following the presentation, claiming that they had been replaced by a much bigger movement. A new group – The Canadian Group of Painters – was formed. Perhaps the Group of Seven realized that their renown, while serving to give Canadians a new picture of the landscape, also made it difficult for other artists to accomplish this same task. With Lismer and Jackson as its mentors, the new group attempted to further the search for meaningful interpretations of the Canadian vista that had been spearheaded by the Group of Seven.

Following World War Two, most mainstream artists turned away from natural subjects and attempts to portray a unique Canadian identity through landscape art. It was in this period, curiously enough, when large-scale developments began their affects on Canadian rivers and streams. Industrial development polluted more and more rivers and streams. Hydroelectric dams arrested the flow of rivers that had inspired art and given life to the people and animals that lived along their shores. Enormous reservoirs drowned thousands of square kilometres of some of Canada’s most scenic and productive regions. The people who lived at the rich boundary of water and land suffered from this development.

If artists reflect the soul of a people, then it is possible that not just artists, but Canadians in general, were looking elsewhere for meaning in their country. Unlimited growth and spiralling wealth became

²⁰ Jackson, A.Y. *A Painter’s Country: the Autobiography of A.Y. Jackson*, Memorial ed. (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1976), pp. 56-57. Quote was reprinted with the permission of Stoddart Publishing Co. Limited, Don Mills, Ontario.

Robert Bateman, *Northern Reflections*
– Loon Family. © 1981 Boshkung, Inc.
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paramount. Manipulation of rivers meant power and profit, so streams became elements of plumbing, to be dammed, diverted, and converted to sewers for the wastes of our industrial society.

In recent years, artists have been turning back to the natural landscape, and some of them have used their art to raise awareness of environmental issues. For instance, Carmanah Creek, a stream on Vancouver Island, along which grow the greatest Sitka Spruce trees in the world, was slated for clear-cut logging. In 1989, 70 artists, including Robert Bateman, Toni Onley and Roy Vickers visited it to paint their conception of this magnificent wilderness valley. Their work helped focus attention on the valley and its importance to Canada; their concern may signal a change in the values of a nation.

These modern day artists have not gone unappreciated. Landscape art has undergone a surge of renewed popularity in Canada. Names like Robert Bateman have become synonymous with environmental conservation as well as with brilliant artistry. Bateman's paintings, such as *Summer Morning – Loon* and *Northern Reflections – Loon Family*, which highlight natural settings and the wildlife that inhabit them, are images Canadians hold in growing appreciation. This reflects the continuing trend toward environmental awareness. Canadians are becoming increasingly concerned about the predicament of natural systems around the world.

Water and music

The gurgling of a stream, the thunderous crashing of waterfalls, and the quick dripping of a spring thaw – this blend of sound is nature's music. These water sounds form the backdrop to the outdoor environment. Although they may go unnoticed by the casual visitor, if you sit by a stream or river and concentrate on listening, an orchestra of sound can be heard.

There have been many songs written about water but one can only imagine the even greater number of compositions which have been influenced by the various intonations of moving water. Perhaps this is due to our instinctive human reactions to the sounds of water. Water ballads can range from the powerful crashing of waves and waterfalls to the playful meandering of a flowing stream; both extremes can be inspirational, one because of its force and the other because of its gentleness.

The explorers who mapped the new land travelled by water in canoes of birch bark propelled by extraordinary men – the voyageurs. For many years their songs were the only music considered to be distinctively Canadian. Peter Newman provides a glimpse of them:

Because they could boast of their exploits to no one but themselves, the voyageurs had to concoct their own sustaining myths. To offset the tedium of paddle strokes, they sang. The melodies were work songs, a way to ease the tedium of repetitive labour while endowing it with a comforting cadence.²¹

Music, says Newman, was in the canoeists' souls. Many songs were made up but most were not written down. The water-borne songs of the voyageurs often contained an assortment of English, French, and Indian words. They may not have been technically sophisticated but they left an enduring impression on those who heard them. British subject John MacTaggart's encounter with the voyageurs' music was recounted in his work entitled *Three Years in Canada: An Account of the Actual State of the Country in 1826-7-8*. He states:

Many of their canoe-songs are exquisite; more particularly the air they give them. . . . We must be in a canoe with a dozen hearty paddlers, the lake

²¹ From *Caesars of the Wilderness* by Peter C. Newman. Copyright © Power Reporting Limited, 1987. Reprinted by permission of Penguin Books Canada Limited.



▶ R. Murray Schafer's *Music for Wilderness Lake*. Photos courtesy of Rhombus Media, Toronto.



*pure, the weather fine, and the rapids past, before their influence can be powerfully felt.*²²

"A Canadian Boat Song" was written in 1804 by Thomas Moore after paddling down the St. Lawrence from Kingston to Montreal. According to the song:

*Faintly as tolls the evening chime,
Our voices keep tune and our oars keep time . . .
Soon as the woods on the shore look dim,
We'll sing at St. Anne's our parting hymn.
Row, brothers, row, the stream runs fast,
The rapids are near and the daylight's past . . .*²³

The canoe, the paddle, and the stream, which stimulated so many of the songs of the voyageurs, inspired other music too. More than 170 years after Moore wrote "A Canadian Boat Song," Montreal composer André Gagnon recorded his tribute to the mighty St. Lawrence in a symphonic poem fittingly entitled "Le Saint Laurent." It evokes many moods of the

stream which, though sadly abused, is still central to the life and commerce of central and eastern Canada.

During most of the early 19th century, European music was dominant in Canada. But after the Second World War, composers and performers turned again to Canadian themes and to the natural world for inspiration. Composer Claude Champagne said "I was always much impressed with nature. . . . [it] was the strongest influence in my life . . . so far as my work was concerned."²⁴ His "Symphonie gaspésienne" evokes the waves and the gulls and the mists of river and rock-bound shore.

The music of Murray Schafer

In his music, R. Murray Schafer, one of Canada's most prominent contemporary composers, returns often to the streams and lakes of his native land. He writes, "A mountain stream is a chord of many notes strung out stereophonically across the path of the attentive listener."²⁵

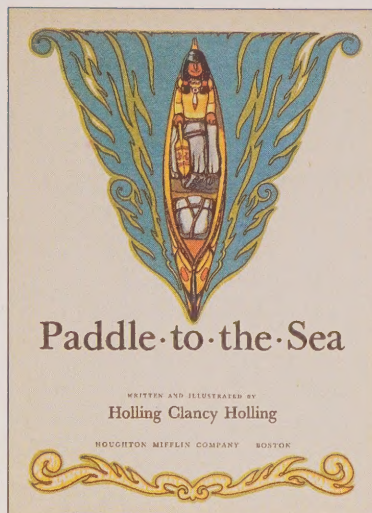
²² MacTaggart, John. *Three Years in Canada: An Account of the Actual State of the Country in 1826-7-8*, Volume I (London, England: Henry Colburn, 1829), pp. 254-255.

²³ Moore, Thomas. "A Canadian Boat Song," in *Folk Songs of Canada*, eds. Edith Fulton Fowke and Richard Johnston (Waterloo: Waterloo Music Company Ltd., 1966), pp. 60-61.

²⁴ Champagne, Claude. As quoted in *Claude Champagne (1891-1965): Composer, Teacher, Musician*, by Maureen Nevins (Ottawa: National Library of Canada, 1990), p. 43.

²⁵ Schafer, R. Murray. *The Tuning of the World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), p. 18.

From *Paddle to the Sea* by Holling Clancy Holling. Copyright (c) 1941 and 1969 by Holling Clancy Holling. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Co. All rights reserved.



Schafer wrote *Minnewanka* or *The Moments of Water* for unaccompanied voices to describe various states of water. His *Music for Wilderness Lake* was first performed in September of 1979 by 12 trombonists distributed in the trees around a small Ontario lake. The composer directed from a raft in the lake, and the music was recorded by microphones in boats.

Another of Schafer's well known compositions is *The Princess of the Stars*, a piece which takes place upon a mountain lake. The performance commences at sunrise, rain or shine, so audience participation is somewhat more demanding than traditional concerts. But as Schafer explains:

*I think there's a sense of awe when you go to "Princess of the Stars" no matter what the weather is like. I've been to performances when it was pouring rain, and they were some of the most beautiful I've ever seen. One really can't believe that these boats are moving in and out of the mist and the dark water. It's magical.*²⁶

Perhaps the most well known Canadian song about water is Gordon Lightfoot's "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald." The song tells the tale of the mysterious shipwreck of an iron ore carrier on Lake Superior in 1975. Local mariners said the ship was a victim of the "curse of the eleventh month." None of the 29 crew members were ever found, as the song explains:

*The legend lives on from the Chippewa on down
Of the big lake they call "Gitche Gumme."
The lake, it is said, never gives up her dead
When the skies of November turn gloomy.
With a load of iron ore twenty-six thousand tons more
than the Edmund Fitzgerald weighed empty,
That good ship and true was a bone to be chewed
when the "Gales of November" came early.*²⁷

Water has served many functions in musical composition; it has been an inspiration, a subject, and even a studio. But in 1989, when thousands of people gathered at the site of a half-built dam on the Oldman River in Southern Alberta, music by popular performers expressed anger at the building of the dam. Songs written to protest the damming of the Oldman focus attention on efforts to protect this part of Canada's natural heritage.

New expressions for water

Writers, musicians, and artists, continue to express their love of our rivers, lakes, and streams, but today their voices can be heard through an immense range of artistic media. Photography has played a vital role as an art form in itself as well as providing models for later paintings. Landscape artistry has especially benefited from the latter, as it makes the wilderness accessible to all artists. More than a century ago, the Montreal studio of William Notman sent photographers out across the country, accumulating a priceless collection of photographs that provided the basis for paintings by such artists as Otto Jacobi, Allan Edson, and John A. Fraser.

Every summer, adventurers in modern fibreglass canoes experience the smooth dark waters and foaming white rapids of routes traced out so long ago by Indians, explorers and traders. In a particularly fitting commemoration of Canada's centennial in 1967, canoes representing all the provinces and territories followed the paths of the voyageurs from the Rocky Mountains to Montreal. Further, numerous films and television documentaries have chronicled the exploits of modern voyageurs who re-enact these journeys.

River travellers of today are no longer limited to pencilled entries in an explorer's journal. *Paddle to the Sea*, based on the Holling Clancy Holling book by the same name, is a classic National Film Board production by Bill Mason that has made the system of streams, lakes and rivers from Lake Superior to the Atlantic a vivid reality for thousands of children.

²⁶ Schafer, R. Murray. As quoted in "Environment on Stage: Changes Afoot in the Performing Arts." *Environment Views*, (Winter 1991/92), p. 12.

²⁷ "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald" by Gordon Lightfoot © 1976 Moose Music Inc. Used by permission.

When setting out from Montreal each spring, the voyageurs lost all contact with their families for months at a time. But when a young Canadian couple, Gary and Joanie McGuffin, set off to paddle their canoe 6,000 miles from Baie Comeau on the St. Lawrence River to Tuktoyaktuk on the Beaufort Sea, they reported their progress to a national audience on CBC radio, and published a book that recounts their journey in picturesque detail.

Turning the tides

Many of our artists, from painters to writers to film makers, are documenting what is happening to our water and land. They are supplying us with the images and information we need to assess our current actions. Can we turn back the tide of the effects of large-scale development of rivers, lakes and streams? Roderick Haig-Brown found it difficult to be optimistic. In *Measure of the Year*, he wrote:

It is in the history of civilizations that conservationists are always defeated, boomers always win, and the civilizations always die.²⁸

But Canadians are demanding protection of their natural heritage, and this may slow the rate at which our water resources are degraded. One result of public concern was the establishment in 1984 of The Canadian Heritage Rivers System, by the federal government and many of the provincial governments. This will help protect our water resources from further degradation. National parks and some provincial parks also protect lakes and streams from abuse by preserving certain areas in their natural state – free from direct contamination by various industries. To date, only a small fraction of our water resources are protected in this way. But these actions represent the beginning of a movement that will strive to rehabilitate damaged aquatic ecosystems and to prevent any further degradation.

As we pause to think about our water systems, we see a valuable resource, sustaining our industry, vegetation, and health. But upon careful reflection a deeper relationship can be revealed: water sustains our Canadian spirit. It forms a link between citizens from every region across the land.

To deepen our understanding of water and land and our relationship with them, we turn to our artists for expression of the things that most of us feel, but few are able to communicate. The art may be an Indian legend, or a modern novel; it might be expressed in a petroglyph, a Group of Seven painting, or in a film; it may be a song of the voyageurs, or a modern composition dedicated to a northern lake, but through each

of these art forms, an appreciation for the complexity of water in human life is expressed.

We should let our minds and imaginations follow the flow of water as it winds through our country, recognizing that people from every area are sustained in body and spirit by the same water that soothes us. Just as the smallest trickle of water eventually flows and expands into a lake, perhaps our minds will follow a similar path in our own progression toward tolerance and stewardship.

Diving beneath the surface

Environmental Citizenship is an initiative of Canada's Green Plan. Its goal is a society where individuals and groups have the knowledge and values which will help them take responsible environmental action. The objective of the Freshwater Series is to provide a basic understanding of the issues and concerns that relate to water in Canada. For more information please write or call the Environment Canada office nearest you or:

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This publication is intended to provide an overview of the vast amount of Canadian art which illustrates water's influence on Canada's natural and artistic history. Space and time limitations prevented the mention of many Canadians whose contributions in this area have been equally important.

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